Defending Sessions, Lawmaker Urges

By Michael Isikoff
Washington Post Staff Writer

The chairman of the House panel that oversees the FBI yesterday rushed to the defense of embattled Director William S. Sessions, calling him "the best FBI director ever" and asking President Clinton to order a new inquiry into alleged ethical abuses by the director.

The ringing endorsement from Rep. Don Edwards (D-Calif.), chairman of the House judiciary subcommittee on civil and constitutional rights, came as Sessions stepped up an extraordinary, one-man lobbying campaign to hold onto his job.

Appearing on two television talk shows, Sessions said he hopes to meet with Clinton and discuss the charges before the president makes any decision on his fate.

A scathing report by the Justice Department's internal watchdog office, approved by then-Attorney General William P. Barr on Jan. 15, concluded that Sessions repeatedly violated bureau regulations, including using FBI aircraft for personal trips, engaging in a "sham arrangement" to avoid paying taxes on the unofficial use of a government limousine and misusing funds for a fence at his home that could not be justified on security grounds.

But Edwards yesterday said "there were problems with the charges" against the director and suggested they stemmed from unidentified persons who have long wanted to get rid of him.

The congressman, a former FBI agent, also angrily denounced Barr for approving the ethics report on his last day in office. "I don't like Pearl Harbors," Edwards said. "I don't like hit and run."

"I can confidently say that William Sessions is the best FBI director ever. He has been an agent of change," Edwards wrote to Clinton in a letter that praised Sessions's efforts to fight violent street crime, modernize the bureau's fingerprinting and other techniques, and increase the number of women and minority agents.

Saying that those changes have "probably generated animosity on the part of a few at the bureau" and that others at the Justice Department were angered by Sessions "political independence," Edwards told the president: "I would urge you to carefully review the ethics report, give Director Sessions a full opportunity to respond and conduct through your own staff a fresh inquiry into any disputed matters."

The comments by Edwards, one of the most liberal members of the House Judiciary Committee, was one indication of the complex political lines being drawn over the embattled FBI director.

When the report by the Justice Department's Office of Professional Responsibility, an office of career investigators, was released last week, Barr presented the matter as open and shut. He called OPR's conclusions of ethical violations "overwhelming" and Sessions's explanations "wholly unpersuasive."

New Probe of FBI Chief

After receiving a copy later in the week, Clinton spokesman George Stephanopoulos called it "disturbing" but said White House legal advisers wanted to given Sessions an opportunity to present his side of the story. Sessions, who was appointed by President Ronald Reagan, has served five years of a 10-year term. He can be removed by the president at any time.

The president "wants to make sure Judge Sessions has a full chance to present his defense," Stephanopoulos said yesterday. He also indicated that the matter likely will not be resolved until Clinton names an attorney general.

Since the weekend, Sessions has mounted his own lobbying campaign, summoning reporters to his office to present his defense, appearing on television talk shows on NBC and CNN yesterday, and seeking support on Capitol Hill.

Edwards said yesterday he spoke "a couple of times" with Sessions, and congressional sources said the FBI director phoned, or was trying to reach, other key members of Congress, such as House Judiciary Committee Chairman Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.) and Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Joseph R. Biden (D-Del.).

There were indications yesterday that Sessions's congressional support cuts across political lines. Among those who advised against a rush to judgment was Sen. Orrin G. Hatch (Utah), ranking Republican on the Senate judiciary panel.

"I'm surprised at the petty nature of some of the charges," Hatch said in a statement. While other OPR allegations against Sessions are "serious," Hatch added that Sessions "should have every chance to be exonerated. In my experience with him, he's a very fine person."

Sessions's strongest support has come from Democrats like Edwards who applaud his efforts to recruit minorities and suspect Barr retaliated against him for failing to be more pliable.

But department officials familiar with the case against Sessions dismiss suggestions that the report was politically motivated, noting it was initiated and conducted by OPR, an office with no political appointees. "Barr played no role in the inquiry," said one knowledgeable official, saying the former attorney general wasn't even consulted on the report until it was finished.